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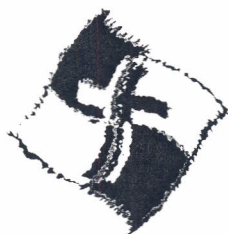
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THE UNIVERSALITY OF GOD'S LOVE CONFRONTS RACISM IN THE CHURCH



Daisy L. Machado

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In a few short years both a century and a millennium will draw to a close. The history pages will give voice to a complex narrative of the progress of the human race, especially in the 20th Century. It will tell of the great technological and scientific advancements of our century and also of the horror of wars; it will also tell of the triumphs of the millions who have sought peace and who often gave their lives in the process. This history will describe the continued struggles of people around the globe who have hungered for freedom, equality, and racial harmony.

In the telling of this history, Christianity will hold a prominent place. Today, we are the inheritors of the legacy of the Christian faith with its numerous human failings and persistent divine blessings. We are

the inheritors of a history that can be celebrated but also must be examined critically. And so we ask ourselves as the Christian community of 1997, who face this coming millennium, what have we contributed to the telling of the Christian story in our own lifetimes? What will the historical narrative have to say about the presence and influence of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States in the 20th Century? How will history judge the presence and influence of the Disciples?

Confronting Racism

I ask these questions because the invitation given to me for this article was to write about the relationship between racism and the Bible. In many ways I find it troubling and painful that at this point in our

history, both as a nation and as a people who profess to be Christian, we are still in need of confronting racism and its insidious consequences.

It is disconcerting, not because racism exists at all, but because it is still so prevalent and finds such a comfortable toleration zone within that very same community of people who proclaim Christ as God and Savior. How can this be when the Christian faith—our Christian faith—is the contradiction of what racism is?

If we truly believe that the gospel message proclaims the possibility of a fuller and richer life that is not dependent on worldly values or possessions, and if we are offered that kind of profound liberation by God, why can't the Christian faith we proclaim cast out the fear many in

the church feel—fear that is the prime ingredient for sustaining racism?

As long as we live in fear of people of other skin color or culture or language or economic status, we will continue to resist the divine invitation to celebrate the diversity of humanity as a gift from God and not a curse.

Do we negate God's love?

It would be difficult to find a Christian adult who, after years of Sunday school and summer church camps, would not be familiar with the children's song, "Jesus loves me, this I know." The words to this unadorned song contain the greatest teaching of the gospel. In it generations of Sunday school children have been told of the certainty of God's love for humanity, a humanity that is multicolored. It tells of a love that went beyond words, "For God so loved..." and made itself real in the life of Jesus, "...that [God] gave..."

To know that one is loved is a powerful and empowering knowledge. But what happens when ideology—be it political, economic, social, racial, sexual—challenges the basic tenet of the Christian faith, the surety of God's love for humanity?

What happens when the beliefs and symbols used by a society to understand and interpret itself, negate God's love and all that love implies? What happens when the Christian community uncritically adopts those same values and then cloaks them in biblical language?

Facing off with ideology

To talk about "racism and Christianity" or "racism and the Bible" means one has to deal with



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issues that are both difficult and thorny. In our century, Auschwitz made it clear that humans have a great and terrible capacity for hating.

The senseless destruction of life that took place in the Nazi concentration camps of Europe forever tarnished the high hopes men and women had for themselves for a moral and equal society. And the question must be asked, "What did Christians do to stop the killing?"

There are, of course, no simple answers to why Christians in any circumstance fail to act upon their faith. Christianity, like all world religions, is constantly being challenged and is often reshaped by the human society in which it exists.

One of the major forces challenging Christianity is ideology. Ideology—its use and misuse—is of course inevitable. All human societies around the world, in today's world and in the past, created and used ideologies to motivate political, economic and religious action.

Racism, as an ideology, has antecedents that go back into antiquity.

For example, the citizens of the Greco-Roman world saw themselves as privileged. Centuries later, the medieval Christians with issues that are both difficult thought of the

pagan world that surrounded them to be made up of "children of darkness," a term used both figuratively and literally.

Humans are very prone to think in terms of "Us vs. Them." However, when the Bible becomes a device for upholding ethnocentrism and even nascent racism, the Christian community finds itself in grave danger.

Misusing scripture

In our century we have witnessed how the ideological concept of racism has been transposed into a tenet of religious belief by using the very Bible we uphold to be holy scripture. Yet if we examine how and why this happened we will uncover a process in which nationalistic, economic, and political ideologies and interests have uprooted biblical concepts so as to make them useful in reaching the goals of particular ethnic groups.

A clear example would be the use of scripture to support slavery. In Genesis 9 we find the "curse of Ham," which has been interpreted by many as the curse that led to the creation of a people forever "marked" by dark or black skin and destined to slavery. For those involved in the trade of humans as slaves, this biblical narrative justified

the enslavement of black or dark skinned people (Africans and Moors) since they already had been cursed by God.

However a careful reading of the text helps us see how this text was uprooted and manipulated by those who sought to become wealthy by means of the slave trade.

What is ignored by the manipulations of the text is that it is Noah and not God who says the curse; God is not a participant in this family dispute. Therefore it is not "God's curse" but instead the words of a father angry and embarrassed by the consequences of his uncontrolled drinking.

In Genesis 10 we find the so-called "Table of Nations" used to make the connection between race (dark skin) and Ham (cursed) since his descendants are listed as coming from Africa and the Middle East.

However, if indeed there is such a divine curse upon people who are black, then we find something totally opposite in Numbers 12:1. This passage tells how Miriam and Aaron greatly displease God by criticizing their brother Moses' wife, a Cushite or black woman.

In an ironic contrast, God punishes Miriam with a leprosy described as "white as snow" for her racism against a woman whose skin is black. Her racism is offensive to God and God reacts with little toleration or sympathy for the racial arrogance displayed by Miriam and Aaron.

Are we "the people of God?"

Surely there are many other ambiguous biblical passages about race and racism that have led to

controversy and have been used to oppress, denigrate and kill. Yet what is important to remember is that despite the human lens we use to filter and interpret the Bible, the Old Testament especially does not seek to make a racial distinction about people.

What is important is the identity of a people in terms of their relationship with God. Blacks are not excluded from the story of Israel. At the same time, it is clear that any race not in covenant with God will be subject to divine judgment.

Perhaps some of us in the church are uncomfortable with the significance given by Old Testament writers to being "the people of God." It seems a paradox that one chosen nation should become the gateway for the salvation of all nations.

However in the New Testament we also can discover joyfully how Paul, a Jew, takes the Old Testament idea of God's divine election and expands it to the church, without any concern for race or social class.

In the New Testament we find that the writers are not so much concerned with one ethnic group as they are with presenting a new type of universalism that promotes unity and community.

Paul proclaims that it doesn't matter if one is Greek or Hebrew, male or female; in Jesus we are able to coexist in love and mutual respect.

In the book of Acts we are told how it is an Ethiopian, an African, who is the first Gentile convert.

James tells how God breaks down social class by choosing the poor who are rich in faith.

Peter proclaims that all humans were wanderers with no particular

identity until Christ made us into God's people, with a new identity, a new purpose, a new hope.

The debate about race and the Bible is far from over. However the great challenge that confronts the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) today is to give life to the mandate given by Christ for a pluralistic community of believers.

More than words preached from a pulpit or resolutions taken by an Assembly, we are to acknowledge and celebrate in our regional and congregation committees, in our outreach dollars, in our new church starts, in our administrative appointments, the integrity and the worth of all racial ethnic groups.

Our commitment must be to become that people who see beyond skin color, who hear more than English with an accent. "Jesus loves me...." and Jesus loves you, too! We all are important. We all are necessary. We all are loved.

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The Disciple, a journal of news and opinion of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) has recently printed as part of a series a number of articles related to racism. Those articles can be found beginning in September 1996 (page 2 and following) through the July/August 1997 issue. For 1997, see especially January (page 18), February (page 22), March (page 12), and June (page 45).